

TALENT

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because he and his team are in a new situation doesn't necessarily make them an underdog.

"I've been here for four years and this is a position that I have only had the chance to do just this one time," he said. "I think it is a new feeling about going to the tournament and being one of the top teams, but I don't consider us a dark horse."

In his junior year, Williamson, who is averaging 19.8 points per game while shooting .566 from the field, is trying to lead his fifth-ranked Razorbacks (27-5) back to the top of the college basketball ranks. And according to Williamson, now is the ideal time for his team to do just that.

"We kind of dug ourselves into a hole early in the year," Williamson said, adding that he understood where some of the criticism of his team has come from. "When we didn't come back and play with the same intensity as we did last year, I can understand why some people may have fallen off of the bandwagon."

"Now I feel that we have come back and are playing like we are capable of playing. We are starting to get progressively better and better. Hopefully by the time we reach our peak this season it will be tournament time. What better place to reach your peak than in a tournament?"

Like O'Bannon, Williamson, who was the MVP of last year's Final Four, believes that the pressure that his team has faced this season has more pros than cons.

PLAYERS TO WATCH



STACKHOUSE

Stackhouse averaged 19.3 points per game for the Heels while pulling down just over eight rebounds. Last year's ACC tournament MVP, Stackhouse is shooting 71.3 percent from the line this year and an impressive 51 percent from the field. Was named this year's Sports Illustrated Player of the Year.

"We felt a lot of pressure this year as far as being the No. 1 team coming back," he said. "Teams are giving us their best shot, and now the tournament is about to roll around, and there is pressure on everyone. We've felt the pressure all year, so we want to see how other teams do when they have the same pressure on them."

After going to the Final Four last season, Stoudamire believes that his Wildcats are ready for the tournament.

"I think that experience last year will definitely help us," Stoudamire said. "Going into this year's tournament, we know what to expect and we won't have that burden of being knocked off in the first round on our back anymore."

Much like Williamson, Stoudamire believes that his team has the experience to sit back and see how other teams cope with the tournament pressure.

"We are going in as an experienced team and we know what to expect and we know what it takes to get there," Stoudamire said.

Stoudamire earned the co-Pac-10 player of the year after averaging 23 points and 7.4 assists per game this season, good for the Pac-10 lead in both categories. He also notched an .830 free throw percentage, a .463 percentage from beyond the arc and an average of 3.7 three-point field goals per game. His numbers are one of the key factors in Arizona's 13-5 Pac-10 record in what Stoudamire calls a very competitive conference.

"The Pac-10 Conference has just been so competitive and I think that is only going to help us out when the team's hit the tournament," he said.

Smith's 2.9 blocked shots per game, coupled with his 20.9 point scoring average and 59.4 field goal percentage, helped 10th-ranked Maryland finish the season with a 24-7 record. Whether or not he decides to go pro next season, Smith said, that record could very easily translate into a national championship right now.

"I sense an urgency to win a national championship but I'm not worried about that decision right now," Smith said, dismissing any questions about his possible venture to the NBA next season. "We have talent here right now to win a national championship, so that is on my mind."

And, he said, there is no better time to win the championship than right now.

"Myself and the whole team are ready to get this thing started," he said.

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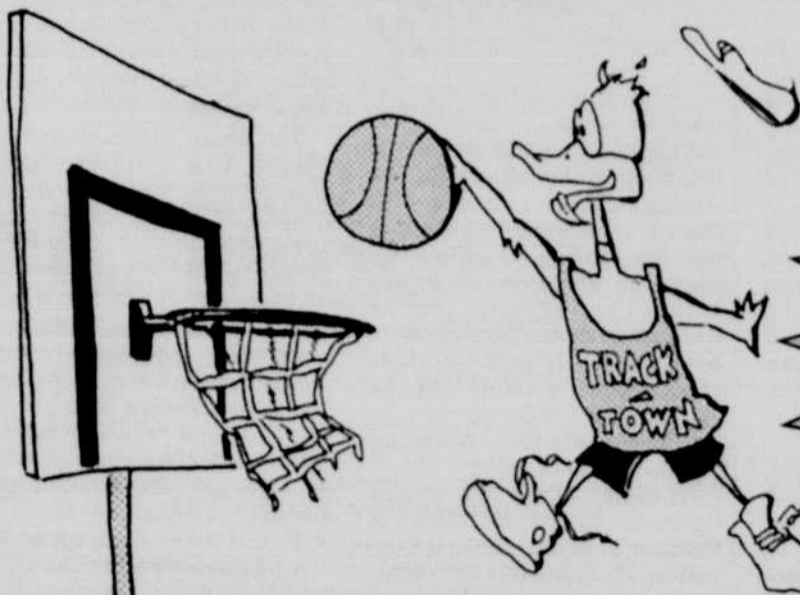
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